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MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Colombia Under A New President

INTRODUCTION

The inauguration of 61-year-old Alfonso Lopez Michelsen as President of Colombia on August 7 will place the country on a slightly left-of-center course, but the new administration will bring no major shifts in either US-Colombian relations or domestic policies. After the Liberal Party leader is inaugurated, changes in policies from those of incumbent Conservative Misael Pastrana will be more tactical than strategic in nature. Lopez refers to himself as center-left and is in fact somewhat more moderate than Pastrana, but both men belong to the broad Colombian center.

The absence of significant differences between the Liberal and Conservative parties throughout Colombian history in large part accounts for the size of the country's political center. It also explains the success of the National Front coalition in which the two parties have been allied since 1958. The 16-year Front concludes with Pastrana's departure from office. In an effort to ease the transition from coalition rule, the agreement calls for continued Liberal-Conservative parity in appointive positions during the first post-Front government. Thus, Lopez will fill half of the appointive positions in his administration with members of the opposition party. Although Lopez' presidency will be the last under the National Front and his party will control the Congress, there is little likelihood that he will attempt to isolate the Conservatives politically until late in his four-year term.

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The new administration will look a great deal like the present one below the appointive level. Although retirements will be encouraged to bring younger technicians into the government, there will be few new personnel at the working level. Domestically, this is likely to mean that the transition to new programs will be very slow. In the area of foreign relations, some rather abrupt changes will be noted, but these will be largely superficial. Observers both inside and outside Colombia are likely to see little major change, and what they see is likely to be orderly and gradual.

The new Congress convened on July 20. Lopez, whose party has a majority of 59 percent in the Senate and 58 percent in the Chamber of Deputies, is likely to experience little difficulty with legislation, as a simple majority is needed for the passage of most bills. The Congress functions very slowly, however, and Lopez is expected to ask for and receive "extraordinary powers" to initiate anti-inflation measures and to reorganize some governmental institutions.

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DOMESTIC PROGRAMS

Soon after the April 21 election, Lopez began taking preliminary steps toward initiating new legislation and organizing the new congressional leadership. For several months now a variety of commissions have been formulating an income and salary policy and developing legislation concerning electoral reforms and the reorganization of the offices of Comptroller General and Attorney General. Also soon after the election, Lopez asked the National Industrial Association, the Union of Colombian Workers, and the Colombian Workers Confederation to name representatives to participate with Lopez' own representatives in establishing an ad hoc agreement on salaries and income.

Lopez considers such a policy essential to controlling inflation and lowering the cost of living--his main campaign pledge. It is evident that he will move slowly in this area, however. He will practice fiscal austerity in government, including unspecified tax reforms and decreased foreign borrowing, and will urge similar restraint on the rest of the country. He will also attempt to raise the income level of the small farmer, still in many ways the backbone of the nation's economy, by increasing the availability of technical assistance and credit through the Agrarian Reform Institute, which is to be streamlined. Large land holdings are certain to be left untouched, however, as much of Lopez' financial backing has always come from wealthy landowners.

Since the election, Lopez has elaborated on his plans for other domestic policy changes. He is committed to augmenting personal freedoms and rights, although he has made it clear that he would not hesitate to suspend such guarantees if necessary to preserve order--not an inconsequential provision in a country with Colombia's history of violence. He has made a controversial pledge to "modernize" church-state relations, by which he means to extend to non-Catholics tax-exemption privileges and to

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recognize civil marriage. This last provision will lead to a de facto recognition of divorce, as Lopez has pointed out.

Two of the earliest bills Lopez can be expected to send to congress will propose lowering the voting age to 18 years and guaranteeing equal rights to women. These were major campaign promises, and their enactment will go far toward counterbalancing possible disappointment with what is certain to be the more cautious pace of economic legislation.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Lopez, who served as foreign minister from 1968 to 1970, will continue the policy of "international pluralism" followed by all National Front administrations. He is likely to be somewhat more aggressive than his predecessors in initiating trade relationships with Communist governments, particularly China, but he will be in no hurry to elevate trade missions to diplomatic status.

Colombian-US relations are likely to remain good, although they may be strained occasionally by Lopez' quest for pluralism. Lopez has criticized some aspects of US policy toward Latin America, singling out seeming inconsistencies between friendly overtures by the Department of State and strict enforcement of protective trade regulations by the Department of Commerce. He has also expressed the view that US policy on Cuba is out of date. Lopez apparently considers his criticism of the US constructive, and certainly it will not interfere with normal bilateral relations.

Lopez supports lifting OAS sanctions against Cuba and has considered moving unilaterally to re-establish relations with Havana. If a formal resolution is introduced at the OAS seeking to normalize Cuban relations multilaterally, however, Lopez is likely to support it. His relations with the military government of Chile can be expected to be cool so long as human rights remain an issue.

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As part of the same picture of international independence, Lopez has already taken a protectionist stand regarding natural resources. He envisions restructuring foreign investment regulations to favor mixed enterprises with state control. Such a change is taking place in the iron-ore and gold industries now; nickel and petroleum will probably follow. Lopez insists that foreign investment will continue to be welcomed, however, and his announced desire to increase exports implies a high level of foreign participation. He will emphasize income from mineral exports, food-stuffs, and labor-intensive goods for sale to countries with high local labor costs.

THE POLITICAL SCENE

Politically, the new president is likely to be faced with two major problem areas: youth and the transition from coalition to adversary politics. Students at Colombia's universities and larger urban secondary schools overwhelmingly supported Lopez' candidacy, and many worked long and hard for his campaign. Among other things, they were captivated by his promise to lower the voting age to 18 years. Now viewing the campaign with several months' perspective, Lopez is beginning to realize that the students' hunger for social change far exceeds his ability (or wish) to reorder Colombian society. The enthusiasm of youth will not long be held by Lopez' program to increase the number of individuals covered by social security, nor by his plan to guarantee at least four years of education to all children. The more thoughtful among the youth may even question--with some justification--the government's ability to finance such programs. Ironically, Lopez' almost certain moderation of his predecessor's restrictive policy toward student demonstrations could well lead to more student violence than the country has seen since widespread campus disorders in 1969 and 1970.

The problem of party politics is more subtle. Today, as in 1958 and earlier, the Liberal and Conservative parties are unexpectedly alike, despite their names. They are strongly hierarchical in the

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sense that internal power and authority flows from party leaders through descending levels of organization to the rank and file, with little if any reverse flow. Notwithstanding party splits--which are common, as in 1970 when two Conservatives sought the party's last turn in the presidency under the National Front--both parties are traditionalist and essentially agrarian. They date from the country's independence in 1819, and the intervening years have had remarkably little effect on them. To the extent that they have matured or otherwise changed, they have done so in like proportions, preserving their sameness. The alliance of the two parties since 1958 has further precluded their independent development.

If one of the purposes of the National Front coalition was to provide for the tranquil development of new political institutions, then it failed. In fact, its structure doomed it to failure in that regard. By providing for Liberals and Conservatives to alternate in the presidency and for an equal sharing of other government positions, the coalition destroyed the two parties' need to compete. No matter what happened, the party out of power was guaranteed the presidency within four years, and beyond the presidential office, neither party was ever really out of power. There was little need to campaign for votes, no need to seek legislative trade-offs, and no need to promote or defend policies. There is little wonder that in this context no new ideologies developed.

Further complicating the transition from coalition government is the existence of the National Popular Alliance (ANAPO). Nominally a vehicle for the lingering aspirations of ex-dictator Gustavo Rojas Pinilla after his overthrow in 1957, ANAPO quickly took on a magnified importance because of the National Front itself. Liberal and Conservative politicians who were for any reason dissatisfied with the constraints of the coalition seized upon ANAPO as a protest channel. Although ANAPO candidates were prevented by the National Front from running for public office under the ANAPO banner, they could run as

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alternative candidates of either major party. In this way dissident Liberals and Conservatives were able to band together while the letter of the law establishing the coalition was observed. At the same time--almost without notice by the major parties--ANAPO began to amass an independent constituency of its own.

Following ANAPO's creation in 1962 its candidates, running as Conservatives, garnered 2 percent of the vote in presidential elections in that year, 23 percent in 1966, and 40 percent in 1970. Their showing similarly improved in intervening off-year elections. In 1972, however, when the National Front began its phase-out in local and regional government, ANAPO electoral strength dropped to 19 percent. Also paralleling the phase-out of the coalition and the accompanying return of authentic political competition between the Liberal and Conservative parties, the leaders of ANAPO began to return to their former parties. By the 1974 election, in which ANAPO's share dropped to 10 percent, virtually the entire leadership had abandoned the party.

ANAPO is in eclipse now, but the party's constituency remains a significant political factor. Just under 1.6 million voters supported the party's presidential candidate--Rojas Pinilla himself--in 1970. The number decreased to one-half million in this year's election, not only because of the party's overall decline but also because the attraction of Rojas was absent. The candidacy of his daughter placed the magic Rojas name on the ballot, but traditionalist Colombian voters were far from ready for a female president. Nevertheless, although some of ANAPO's supporters drifted away or failed to vote at all in 1974, there remains a large group of citizens ready either to follow a populist candidate (presumably male), or to turn to any reasonable alternative to the Liberal-Conservative establishment, or both.

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INSURGENCY

No Colombian politician can forget that the primary reason for creating the National Front was to end the bloody violence that characterized Liberal-Conservative politics during the 1940s and early 1950s. No doubt Liberal and Conservative leaders in 1958 hoped that during the coming years of coalition the earlier bloodshed mentality would somehow be outgrown. It remains to be seen whether this has been achieved, but it is probable that major violence between the parties is a thing of the past.

It may be argued that while mature political organizations have failed to appear during the life of the coalition, the armed political gangs of the pre-coalition era have now become institutionalized in the form of guerrilla groups. Originally devoid of ideology and only loosely tied to local Liberal and Conservative bosses, those groups surviving the past two decades have gravitated toward any willing source of support. In the case of the three principal contemporary insurgent groups, support has meant pro-Moscow, pro-Peking, and pro-Havana ideologues. For the new President--as for all of his precursors under the National Front governments--insurgency will be a problem with political, as well as internal security, significance.

The insurgents are well established and indulge in few pretenses. Unlike some guerrillas elsewhere in Latin America, they shun the Robin Hood image of taking from the rich to give to the poor. They do some leftist sloganeering, probably in deference to Communist sources of materiel and funds, but their convictions are only superficially Marxist. They wage a war of attrition against the establishment, attacking isolated police posts and ambushing small army patrols, but they also murder simple villagers for no apparent reason. They live off the land, taking what they need or want from others or from nature. Although they have historical links to the Liberal-Conservative establishment, and more recent links to

organizations of the far left, they have an independent momentum that makes them self-sufficient. Most Colombians see them as almost a part of nature, although an unpleasant one, and seem reconciled to their presence.

PROSPECTS

There is very little likelihood in the foreseeable future of large-scale political violence along the lines of that which almost tore Colombia apart 25 years ago. Nevertheless, the chances of fairly serious violence erupting are greater now than at any time since 1958. The peacekeeping qualities of the National Front have all but disappeared. The forces favoring continued peace--the military and the considerable weight of traditional Colombian conservatism--are probably no greater a deterrent now than they were in the 1940s when the height of violence was reached. The election in April slightly increased the chances of renewed problems in the sense that the dramatic, across-the-board, Conservative loss presages the party's elimination from the meaningful exercise of power for an indefinite period. In the same sense, the inauguration will be an even more important turning point.

Of all the possible establishmentarian presidents from both traditional parties, Alfonso Lopez is an excellent choice as peacekeeper. Not only does he speak for the Liberal Party, but he also can be counted upon to accord the Conservatives their role under the remaining parity provision of the National Front. In addition, he is a rare member of the establishment with a modicum of appeal to the lower classes, including the former Rojas Pinilla constituency that is now at loose ends. During the 1960s, he established a leftist Liberal Party splinter group favoring accelerated social and economic reform. Although he gradually drifted back into the Liberal mainstream, he continues to have a broader appeal than might otherwise be the case.

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As a realist presiding over a difficult period in Colombian history, Lopez can be expected to do nothing to narrow the focus of that appeal. In choosing the six Conservatives he will appoint to his cabinet, he is almost certain to defer to their party leaders; he is equally certain to please the military establishment with his choice of defense minister. He also will move as quickly as prudence will permit to reinvigorate the torpid agrarian reform program and control the nation's inflated economy. He will not be seriously challenged by either rural insurgency, which is likely to continue, or the political left. The open question centers on the Conservatives and how they will play the new role of "loyal opposition."

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